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Connor Winter (left) and coach Mark Wetmore preview the 2014 Buffaloes.

Cross Country Looks To Compete For More Championships

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BOULDER - University of Colorado cross country head coach Mark Wetmore previewed the 2014 season with the local media at CU's annual fall sports media day on Saturday.

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Junior Connor Winter from the men's 2013 NCAA Championship team joined Wetmore at the podium to talk about the men's team. The Buffs return all five scorers (Ammar Moussa, Pierce Murphy, Morgan Pearson, Ben Saarel and Blake Theroux) from nationals, as well as the two non-scorers (Zach Perrin and Winter), and are set-up to defend their title this November. Jake Hurysz will also return to the line-up after redshirting the 2013 season.

The women's team is going to be young, but they return three harriers (Carrie Verdon, Erin Clark and Melanie Nun) from their seventh place finish at NAAs. Both teams have added several new faces and are set to start fall training on August 14.

The season will start on August 30 at the CU Time Trial at the Buffalo Ranch Cross Country Course on CU's South Campus. Admission and Parking are free.

Head Coach Mark Wetmore

General

"Connor [Winter] is the captain of our defending NCAA championship team, he is also the president of SAAC (Student Athlete Advisory Committee) and an engineering major. Cross country doesn't officially begin for another 10 days or so and our athletes are not readily available, they are camping and surfing, but here we go, it comes around before you know it. Track ends on September 9, and cross country begins on August 14, so I think cross country has begun."

On Defending The Team's National Title

"Virtually everybody returns, we graduated away only our alternate who didn't race but was there in case. We have one of our best runners from 2012, who we kept out last year, returning. My task will be deciding who to use and who to save because five comprise the scorers of the NCAA championship and you can put seven on the line, you can run 10 at the conference meet but there is no point in using people unnecessarily, so that will be one of my tasks along with coach [Heather] Burroughs figuring out who to use. Our sport is a little unlike most other sports in that an opponent can have a completely different team, and entirely different roster than they had a year ago; it's not impossible to not make the NCAA championship in one year and have a contending team the next, just the way our sport works and recruiting works. Yeah, we're the defending titles and every defending coach makes up reasons why they shouldn't be the favorite, but the landscape could be very different by November just as far as personnel is concerned.

On The Women's Team

"Probably led by Carrie Verdon, she has been our likely leader for this year. But Erin Clark, who was a freshman last year, did some real good running and Melanie Nun, also a freshman, did

some good running and Maddie Alm and Jenny DeSouchet are returning varsity runners for us. Plus, we've had a good freshman recruiting class, no superstars but people that can help us and unlike men's cross country and most other collegiate sports it's not impossible for a freshman woman to come in and help your team immediately as did two a years ago. So, I think the women were about seventh a year ago and they can be very good again, they can be better than that. Our goal always is to contend for the conference championship, which in our conference takes a lot of contending, and then to take a shot at the podium at the NCAA top four and this team can do it."

On Impact Shalaya Kipp Has On Program

"A women's cross country team is a small culture that can be very different from year to year and very different from team to team. Within that culture, a dominant runner such as Shalaya or Emma [Coburn] before her may or may not be the leader or the mother duck. [Kipp] was a quiet leader a year ago, if necessary would put her foot down and say, 'Ok, we're turning left, don't argue' but didn't have the desire to be the big boss. So, she was a gentle leader and that will be missed because that is a real valuable quality of leadership on a team and I don't know who will emerge as the boss this year. But, there are plenty of bosses, there is me and Heather [Burroughs] so the bossing will get done. And then, how does Shalaya affect the team after she is gone, well one would hope that the athletes learn some work ethic and discipline of life from Shalaya which they should have because she was extremely disciplined and sound and she will still be around. She is a graduate student here in integrated physiology, so she is still around. And then of course we have Emma Coburn who was a multi-time NCAA champion and Olympian, she is here as a volunteer assistant coach and Jenny Simpson who is also a volunteer assistant coach. The present women have lots of opportunity to learn from excellent, dedicated, motivated, sound women."

On Recruiting Strategy

"Cross country to my knowledge is the only sport in the NCAA that has no scholarships; if you want to have a cross country team you have to build it out of the track and field scholarships that are allowed each school. The NCAA and Division I allows men's track teams to spend 12.6 scholarships on athletes but that of course is spread over 18 or 19 events depending on how you count them and over four or five years. In the women's case it's 18. So, how much money do we have available in our budget, each head coach makes a decision whether to spend the money on throwers or sprinters, or hurdlers or distance runners; here we emphasize distance running but still try to have a complete team. Each year I have to sit down with my assistants and say, 'Who's going out, what do we have?' and it's a rare year that we have one scholarship. So, do we go for a monster – trouble is you have to have five of them to run a cross country race. Do you look to spread it around and get five guys for 20 percent and run them 200 miles a week and see who survives? Anyway, the first response to your answer is it depends what money we have. Last year, it was not a big money year, in fact last year was a no money year. I had to look around and find people that could afford a way to come here. If you had a son that ran a 4:01 mile or a daughter that ran a 10:10 for two miles then we weren't on the list because they could go to 100 other places for free. These are the things that we have to factor into our decision making. I'm really happy about who we have coming in this year, there are some real diamonds in the rough and it's my job along with coach Burroughs and the rest of my staff to begin to cut those diamonds and see what we get in a couple years. I'm really lucky though that we get a great elder team back on both sides that I don't need to rush the cutting."

On How He Finds 'Diamonds In The Rough'

"A girl that runs 10:30 for two miles in southern California is different from a girl that runs 10:30 in Maine; that's one thing we begin to look for. We like to look for structure. Academics are more important than you might think, because they have to make it here and they have to stay happy and so we look at academics. A big part of it though is what people from my old neighborhood would call the cut of their jib. We talk to them on the phone, bring them in for a visit, look them in the eye, see how they interact with the team and we put a lot on how they fit in culturally, how they interact with us. If somebody comes on a visit and sits in a room and their mother and father ask all the questions and the candidate looks at their feet we think, 'How is this person going to stand in shorts and a singlet in 10 degrees on a starting line with 300 people who want to kill them. There are a lot of factors, it's very subjective, but we're not in a situation where we have unlimited money and we can bring them all in and throw them into the mix and take the best seven."

On Keeping Team Motivated And Grounded After Having So Much Success

"It's new guys every year, it's a rarity that it isn't new people, there are always new young people coming up nipping at the heels of the older fellers. To paraphrase Heraclitus, no team twice races the same race and so while we have won the Pac-12 a couple of times, it's a whole new race on a whole new course with all new opponents and even different personnel on our team slightly or in different order. That keeps it pretty fresh, but as I said there are always new people and I can think of people that were high on our list two falls ago that better get going or they will be replaced. So, it kind of keeps itself fresh. Believe me, after 20 years I'm out of pep talks, so if they are not motivated they will be left behind. That's the other thing, when we meet in a couple

of weeks to go up to Gold Hill to run 20 miles at 9,000 feet, the unmotivated are eliminated. They get self-selected.

Senior Captain, Connor Winter

On Defending The Team's National Title

"We do have everybody coming back, we lost one guy which was our eighth man and then we added one guy who was injured last year. So, we are hoping to have the same team, if not better. We like our chances of being competitive; we don't make any expectations or bold statements about whether we are going to defend the national championship, we are the national champions and we want to defend our title and you have to know you will have a target on your back. But we do have the talent as long as everyone stays healthy and smart and trains well and we'll see how that goes on the first day of practice and where everyone is at."

On Learning From Last Season

"I definitely feel like we can do that because most of the contributors last season will be back and they learned a lot through being patient. That's really the key with training, you're training all through the summer and then you train through fall and as you get more into the season you really have to be peaking at the right point so you can't peak too early and you can't falter at the very end because that's where it really matters. I think that experience we gained through having that championship and winning it and seeing what it felt like and what it took to be disciplined and sacrifice certain things. The team can change and the dynamics can change, but everyone individually knows what they need to do in order to be at their best and if they do that we can be a great team."

On Being Coached By Mark Wetmore

"I would say it's a great privilege just because he has so much knowledge and he's coached so many great athletes that you trust everything he gives you. All you do is show up that day motivated and ready to work hard and you know that he's going to get you where you need to be. You trust his insight and you can talk to him as a human being, it's not all about track and running you can talk to him about Formula 1 racing or anything. It's really nice to have someone that is so well versed in everything and not just running. He is able to motivate you and instill in you a drive that you want to be the best and keep that culture going year after year."

Colorado Buffaloes Cross Country

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